



## ARE THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN'?

Sunday, November 25, 2007

*Every Sunday CUIP's president Jacqueline Salit and strategist and philosopher Fred Newman watch the political talk shows and discuss them. Here are excerpts from their dialogue on Sunday, November 25, 2007 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show," "Meet the Press" and "The McLaughlin Group."*

**Salit:** The "Meet the Press" panel discussed the dynamics in the Democratic and Republican primaries. First up was the Democratic primary where the Iowa polls have Obama ahead, Clinton in second place and Edwards in third. Statistically it's a dead heat. Michael Murphy, a Republican consultant and somebody who I think is quite bright, talked about the perils for Hillary Clinton. Murphy said 'With all due respect to the campaign, the Clinton campaign is a good campaign and she's a good candidate in a lot of ways. But sometimes the candidate doesn't fit the times. If Hillary loses, it won't be her fault. It will be because the desire for change is so present and she's not a "change" candidate.'

Not to go too far afield, but you and I both watched part of the Martin Scorsese documentary on Bob Dylan last night. One of the people interviewed talked about the Dylan phenomena and Dylan's sudden popularity. He made a reference to Jung's conception of the "collective unconscious" and suggested that the source of Dylan's popularity was that he had the capacity – through his music and poetry – to tap into America's "collective unconscious."

I know there are huge differences between connecting culturally vs. connecting politically and there are also differences between where the country was at in the '60s and where the country is at today. But, nonetheless, to go back to Murphy's point, he suggests that Clinton might not be a candidate that "fits the times." I wonder if you could talk about the notion that some artists, like Dylan, tap into a "collective unconscious" and that some candidates in periods of change "fit the times" while others don't.

**Newman:** Well, is Murphy arguing that if Hillary wins by one vote she fits the times and if she loses by one vote, she doesn't does fit the times?

**Salit:** Good question.

**Newman:** I don't know that there's anything resembling an objective read in politics as to who does and doesn't "fit the times." And in culture, I think it's more the case that a truly significant cultural leap doesn't fit into the times, but actually does more by way of creating the times.

**Salit:** Interesting.

**Newman:** When Dylan put out what could be considered a cultural bombshell, like *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, it didn't so much fit with what was going on in the world; it gave a new way of looking at what was going on in the world, in a cultural sense, so that lots of people could relate to it and identify with it. It's a creative act.

**Salit:** Does that cross over into politics?

**Newman:** In some respects, I think that's what Barack Obama is trying to do, which is a very hard thing to do in the Democratic Party, not to mention the Republican Party. He is trying to create a new cultural understanding of what's going on, that it's time for a whole new politic. Bringing in a whole new politic would be a cultural shift. It's not merely how many votes go this way and how many votes go that way. He's saying, 'We have to move to people being involved in doing politics and doing so in a new way.' If he's going to win, he's going to have to make that cultural shift stick. It's not as simple as "He's a product of the times." He's going to have to give to the times a way of understanding all that's going on.

**Salit:** Would you agree with Murphy that Hillary doesn't do that?

**Newman:** Hillary doesn't do that, no. And, though she's a woman and she'd be the first woman president, she's not shaping her campaign around that cultural shift.

**Salit:** To do that she'd have to play the feminist card much more explicitly.

**Newman:** And I think she doesn't want to do that. Her strategists think it's not the best way in. They think the best framing for her is 'I was there for eight years, so I know what's really going on and this guy doesn't.' But, I think it's a dangerous play on their part.

**Salit:** Dangerous how?

**Newman:** To not play it in more cultural terms, as Obama is. Now, can Obama make that stick? I don't know. But I think the Clinton camp's reliance on "experience" as opposed to new ideas really is "experience" vs. "a cultural shift" and that could leave them vulnerable. How vulnerable? I guess the election results will show us that.

**Salit:** Here's something else I was thinking about. Do the following things connect for you, or do they not connect? There's all the talk about how polarizing Hillary is. All of the polls show this. She is probably the most polarizing figure in American political life. That's one piece of the story. At the same time,

polarization is often associated with or attributed to the political extremes. The idea is that the ultra-conservatives and the ultra-liberals have polarized the country. For example, that's the analysis in Ron Brownstein's new book "The Second Civil War" and that's the nature of political polarization in America, namely it's about the extremes. Hillary, however, is a political figure who is actually at the center. The whole thrust of Clintonism is triangulation, attempting to carve out a position at the center that draws from and plays off these different positions. And yet, she's the most polarizing figure in American politics today.

**Newman:** It makes no sense to say the extremes are responsible for polarization. It's the center that's responsible for polarization. The extremes are the polarization.

**Salit:** The extremes are the poles.

**Newman:** Right, so they're not responsible for it. Actually, the extremes tend to push towards the center to make themselves more acceptable. They go towards each other. But I would say the center is most responsible for what we call polarization in the United States of America today.

**Salit:** How does that work?

**Newman:** If you look at what polarization is, it seems to me, it's not about there being two opposing positions which put you at the extremes. It's about accommodating everything so as to win by one vote. That's wherein the polarization lies. If you're doing politics that way, which is how it's been done in recent years, it becomes exceedingly polarizing. Why? Because you don't get an honest look at the different positions people are taking. It's dishonest and antithetical to what Thomas Jefferson, for example, understood as a precondition for real working democracy, which is that people honestly state and openly vote for the positions they authentically adhere to, and then you develop ways to mix those things together. But now, at the center, there's an entirely different phenomena going on, one of "win at any cost." That's the source of polarization.

**Salit:** Win at any cost is the source of polarization?

**Newman:** Yes, because the negativity of polarization is people saying anything that they want to say to win by one vote. And that produces angry, ugly and gridlocked polarization. No, the extremes are perfectly fine. Extremism, if it's an honest expression of your opinion, is what America is about. You can't simultaneously say that America is about compromise and not say that America is about extremism. Because if there's no extremism, what is it that you're compromising? If compromise becomes a position in itself, then you have polarization.

**Salit:** And, why does compromise as a position in itself, produce polarization?

**Newman:** Because all it's about is winning. And that's when things become violent and vicious and not expressive of what people honestly believe. *I don't give a damn what we say, let's just win. Say anything you like, but just win.* That's what produces this ugly form of polarization.

**Salit:** The "Meet the Press" discussion switched to the dynamics on the Republican side. The consensus, at least at the moment, 39 days out from the Iowa caucus, seems to be that the Democratic nominee will be clear on February 6, the day after Super Tuesday, but that the Republican contest may drag on for a much longer time, perhaps all the way to the Republican Convention. That said, in Iowa, Mitt Romney is in first place, Mike Huckabee is in second place, and then the field kind of scatters for third among Fred Thompson, Rudy Giuliani and John McCain. Huckabee is a social conservative and has the support of the Christian Right and is a factor in Iowa, although most of the analysts don't seem to think he'll be able to hang on for the distance. But, his greatest leverage is in Iowa where he's scuttling the race. The way that he's scuttling the race is by weakening Romney such that Thompson, Giuliani or McCain can jump ahead of Romney as they move into New Hampshire. Consequently, one view is that the thing to look at in Iowa on the Republican side is who finishes third. Again, the presumption being that person – Giuliani, Thompson or McCain – becomes a formidable challenger to Romney. Does that roughly correspond to your view of it?

**Newman:** I don't know that I have a view on the Republican primaries. However, I'm not so sure I agree with your first assumption, which a lot of people are bandying about these days, namely that the Democratic primary is going to be decided on February 5, but the Republicans might go to convention. I think they both might go to convention.

**Salit:** In other words, it's that kind of year for everybody.

**Newman:** I don't have much of a grasp on the Republican primaries. But I do think the Huckabee thing is quite interesting. He's managed to project himself as the genuine conservative. As some people pointed out, that scenario gets you 25% right there.

**Salit:** And the rest of the field divides up the other 75%.

**Newman:** Right. So, I think that's the main dynamic now. I'm not that much of an insider to be able to judge the other scenarios. I'm not much of an insider in the Democratic primary, but even less so relative to the Republican primary.

**Salit:** And, what about the idea that McCain could emerge/re-emerge as the "un-political" candidate?

**Newman:** I think that's a real possibility. That has to do with his strength relative to the independents and the independent vote. That's something everyone's got to keep an eye on.

**Salit:** "The McLaughlin Group" focused on global warming.

**Newman:** They certainly did.

**Salit:** The girls kind of beat up on the boys.

**Newman:** But, they didn't consider the possibility of bringing one of those wind contraptions onto the set of "The McLaughlin Group."

**Salit:** No, they certainly didn't. In some ways, Tony and Pat's position boiled down (no pun intended) to yes, temperatures are rising, but the whole idea that global warming is fundamentally altering human life on the planet and requires a reordering of priorities and policy is a con. Eleanor and Chrystia's argument was it's real, it's happening, that non-renewable reserves of energy sources are running out. But the good news, and this mainly came from Chrystia and the Wall Street crowd, was that we can innovate our way out of these problems. What do you think of this debate?

**Newman:** Well, I think there's an interesting underlying, though unmentioned, issue in this debate.

**Salit:** What is it?

**Newman:** Tony and Pat are saying, at least as I hear it, 'We'll rise or fall, we'll win or lose the whole package by virtue of free market capitalism, by virtue of how the market and consumers react to the price of oil, the price of gasoline, and that sort of thing.'

**Salit:** Okay.

**Newman:** And the other two, in one form or the other, are saying 'Well, you can't just have pure free market capitalism. You have to have some serious government intervention.'

**Salit:** Interesting. Eleanor wants environmental policy intervention and Chrystia wants government investment to spur private investment in alternative energy sources. The government is key in both scenarios.

**Newman:** That's what the debate's about. It's not uninteresting. But it's also a very old debate. Where do we wind up? I don't know. We'll see where we wind up on that fundamental debate, as it relates to this subject and a lot of others as well.

**Salit:** Okay. One human interest question. Did you think that James Carville and Mary Matalin were getting along better today? I thought they were. She's working for Fred Thompson. And he's supporting Clinton. But I thought they seemed more agreeable with each other than usual.

**Newman:** I think they get along better when Mary is making a living off of politics and James is merely giving donations and advice. She's the breadwinner right now.

**Salit:** There you go. I knew you'd have an insight into this. Thanks Fred.